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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effects of increased academic requirements for graduation on secondary vocational enrollments in Colorado. After identifying 111 of the school districts in Colorado that have recently increased their graduation requirements (representing 61 percent of the 180 school districts in the State), researchers randomly selected five schools from each of five size categories. Next, surveys were administered to the principals, directors of guidance, and vocational directors at each of the 25 schools indicated. Data from the completed surveys indicated that an increase in the academic requirements for high school graduation tends to decrease the enrollment in vocational programs. This was particularly true in schools with enrollments of more than 500 students. Cooperative work experience programs appeared to suffer the sharpest enrollment decreases. Many of those educators surveyed expressed concern about the effect that such a trend would eventually have on the dropout rate and on the future of students who would purposefully choose vocational programs rather than preparation for college. Recommendations were made concerning strategies for increasing academic standards without causing a subsequent decrease in student enrollment rates. (The project survey instrument is appended.) (MN)

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Research Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Effects of Increased Academic Requirements for Graduation on Secondary Vocational Enrollments in Colorado

by
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Prepared for the
Colorado State Board
for Community Colleges and Occupational Education

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February 1985

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, considerable attention has been focused upon public secondary education in the United States. The primary reason for this attention is the publication of numerous reports by prestigious groups who called for reform and improvement in secondary education. A Nation at Risk, The Carnegie Report, Campaign for Quality, and The Paideia Report are among those that have received considerable attention. The central theme of these reports is the recommendation to "strengthen" the academic requirements of high schools. Although no specific recommendations are made to reduce or eliminate vocational education, this "back to the basics" movement will undoubtedly impact vocational education.

School districts in most states have responded to this outcry for reform by increasing the number of academic courses required for high school graduation. The assumption being that the addition of more academics will be the most appropriate way to prepare all students for life. However, according to one of the most recently published reports, The Unfinished Agenda, this assumption is wrong. This report states,

> The response by the states has some merit--it does show a strong commitment to improving the quality of education received by students in secondary schools. However, it ignores differences in students' interests and abilities, and it ignores the needs of those high school students who do not plan to go to college and who purposefully choose a vocational program.[1]

The report presented here is a summary of a study sponsored by the State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education (SBCCOE) and was designed to collect specific information regarding enrollment and student demand for various vocational programs in those schools in Colorado that have increased their academic requirements for graduation within the last two years. This summary presents the highlights and major findings of the study.

The project director wishes to express his appreciation to the SBCCOE staff and the advisory committee members (Appendix A) for their direction and assistance in designing and conducting the study. Appreciation is also extended to Ms. Mary DeMaio Brouillette, research technician for the project, and Dr. Boyd Dressler, from the State Department of Education, for their help in collecting and interpreting the data. A special thanks goes to Ms. Connie Mondragon for editing and typing the manuscript.

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[1] The Unfinished Agenda, The National Center for Research in Vocational Education. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

OBJECTIVES

This study was designed with the following specific objectives in mind:

1. To survey the 180 school districts in Colorado to determine the nature and extent of the changes in the academic requirements for graduation in each district

2. To determine the nature and extent of student enrollment changes in vocational education programs in selected secondary schools that have increased their academic requirements for graduation

3. To determine if there is a relationship between increased academic requirements for graduation and school dropouts

4. To compare enrollment and student demand trends in traditional vocational institutional based programs, cooperative work experience programs, and vocational special needs programs

PROCEDURES

The following procedures were utilized in conducting this study:

1. Those school districts that had increased their academic requirements for graduation were determined by reviewing the data from the survey conducted by the Curriculum and Instruction Branch of the State Department of Education. Those school districts that had not returned the survey were contacted by phone so that a response was obtained from each of the 180 school districts in Colorado

2. From the list of districts that had increased their academic requirements for graduation, as determined in the previous procedure, five schools were randomly selected in the five following size categories:

   a. Comprehensive high schools with more than 1,000 students with a vocational skill center in the district

   b. Comprehensive high schools with more than 1,000 students that utilize an area vocational school

   c. High schools with more than 500 and less than 1,000 students

   d. High schools with less than 500 but more than 200 students

   e. High schools with less than 200 students

3. A survey form (Appendix B) was developed to obtain the necessary information to meet the research objectives

4. The high school principal, director of guidance, and vocational director in each of the 25 schools identified in procedure 2 were contacted by telephone. A separate survey form was completed for each of the individuals contacted. In those smaller schools where there was no identified vocational director or the principal also served in this capacity, a vocational teacher was utilized

5. The data from the survey forms were summarized and analyzed

FINDINGS

1. Of the 180 school districts in Colorado, 111 or 61 percent have increased their academic requirements for graduation within the last two years. Of the districts that reported no change when contacted, 4 percent indicated their requirements were presently being reviewed.

2. Ninety-six percent of the schools surveyed reported that no new traditional vocational programs were initiated this year.

3. Four percent of the schools surveyed indicated they had reduced the number of traditional vocational programs offered this past year.

4. Four percent of the schools surveyed reported they had initiated a new cooperative work experience program this year.

5. Twenty-five percent of the schools surveyed reported they had terminated at least one cooperative work experience program this last year. All of the programs terminated were in high schools with enrollments over 500 students.

6. No change in the number of vocational special needs programs offered in the high schools surveyed was reported.

7. Eight percent of the schools surveyed reported an increase in the enrollment in their traditional vocational programs. All of the schools reporting an increase in enrollment in traditional programs had high school enrollments less than 200 students.

8. Twenty-five percent of the schools surveyed reported a decrease in enrollment in their traditional vocational programs. All of the schools reporting a decrease in enrollment in traditional programs had high school enrollments exceeding 500 students.

9. Sixty-seven percent of the schools surveyed reported no change in the enrollment in their traditional vocational programs.

10. None of the schools surveyed reported an increase in enrollment in their vocational cooperative work experience programs.

11. Thirty-six percent of the schools surveyed who had traditional cooperative work experience programs reported a decrease in enrollment in these programs.

12. No significant changes were reported in enrollment in vocational special needs programs.

13. No significant change in the high school dropout rate was reported. However, many vocational directors surveyed and a few counselors felt that their schools' dropout rates were going to increase; whereas, the principals anticipated no significant change.

14. Thirty-eight percent of the principals in the schools surveyed felt an increase in the total units and/or an increase in specific courses required for graduation would cause a decrease in vocational enrollments.

15. Forty-six percent of the counselors in the schools surveyed felt an increase in the total units and/or an increase in specific courses required for graduation would cause a decrease in vocational enrollments.

16. Fifty-eight percent of the vocational directors and/or teachers in the schools surveyed felt an increase in the total units and/or an increase in specific courses required for graduation would cause a decrease in vocational enrollments.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions can be made:

1. An increase in the academic requirements for high school graduation tends to decrease the enrollment in vocational programs. This is particularly true in larger high schools (enrollments above 500 students). The reason for the lesser impact on the smaller schools may be due to the limited course offerings available, and the traditional vocational programs offered (i.e., agriculture, business, and home economics) still maintain strong community and student support in the rural areas

2. Although the enrollment in all vocational programs tends to decrease with an increase in the academic requirements for graduation, cooperative work experience programs suffer the most serious impact. This is probably due to the fact that students enrolled in these programs have limited time to enroll in other academic subjects, since they may spend up to one half of the school day participating in this program. The trend of reduced enrollment and program termination in this area is particularly alarming. The cooperative

method of providing secondary vocational education has been one of the most successful delivery systems available in terms of placing students in jobs for which they were trained and preventing high school dropouts. If the trend continues, high schools will lose a very vital element in their total educational offerings

3. A significant number of the educators surveyed, particularly the counselors and vocational personnel, expressed a concern about the reduced enrollments in vocational programs that result when academic requirements for graduation are increased and the possible effect this will have on high school dropouts. Although no significant change in the dropout rate was presently reported, it appears that it may be too soon to observe the impact of increased requirements for graduation on those students who have no plans for postsecondary education and previously stayed in school only because of their enrollment in vocational courses. Since many of the educators surveyed thought the dropout rate may increase because of a decrease in vocational offerings and enrollments, this area should be monitored very carefully in the future

4. It appears that most school districts that have increased their academic requirements for graduation have done so in response to the desires of their constituency to implement the recommendation of numerous reports calling for excellence and higher standards in the high schools. However, it appears that the effect of some of these changes ignores individual differences in students and tends to screen out those who do not fit the mold and would purposefully choose vocational programs rather than preparation for college

5. Since many districts have increased their academic requirements for graduation within the last two years, the ultimate effect this will have upon enrollments in secondary vocational programs and the high school dropout rate is yet to be determined. Many students who were enrolled in vocational programs that were more than one year in length when the requirement was changed will probably make a concerted effort to complete the total program. The ultimate effect of these changes cannot be assessed until the students who were not enrolled in high school when the change was made make up the total student body of the high school

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. School districts should thoroughly study the impact on all types of students and the effect on enrollment in "elective" courses prior to increasing their academic requirements for graduation

2. School districts should consider letting students utilize specific vocational courses that contain sufficient components in either science, math, communication, or other academic areas to help meet the specific graduation requirement in that academic area

3. School districts that increase their academic requirements for high school graduation should explore various alternatives that will enable students to enroll in vocational courses and still meet the minimum academic requirements for graduation. Such alternatives may include changes in scheduling patterns, articulation agreements with postsecondary institutions, and lengthening the number of periods in a school day

4. Since many academic competencies can be developed in vocational courses, other elective courses, and student organizations, school districts should establish minimum competency requirements in the various academic areas and utilize competency tests and other means, rather than assuming the successful completion of a minimum number of credits in an academic area insures competency in that area

APPENDIX A

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE

School _____

_____ Principal's Name _____

_____ Counselor's Name _____

_____ Vocational Director's Name _____

INCREASED GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

Questions

_____ Number of New Traditional Programs Started

_____ Number of Traditional Programs Terminated

_____ Number of New Traditional Coop Programs Started

_____ Number of Traditional Coop Programs

_____ Number of Traditional Coop Programs Terminated

_____ Number of New Vocational Special Needs Programs Started

_____ Number of Vocational Special Needs Programs

_____ Number of Vocational Special Needs Programs Terminated

Enrollment Trends Over Past Two Years

		A Trad. Programs	B Coop Programs	C Special Needs
Enrollment	Increase			
	Decrease			
	No Change			
Student Demand or Interest	Increase			
	Decrease			
	No Change			

School Dropout -- Increase _____ Decrease _____ No Change _____

Will an increase in total units required for graduation cause

decrease _____ no change _____ in vocational enrollments?

Will the addition of specific course requirements for graduation cause

increase _____ no change _____ in vocational enrollments?

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